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[TITLE PAGE]

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The Death and Burial of *reth* Dak *wad* FADIET OF THE SHILLUK

By P. P. Howell

THE following observations are intended to amplify previous accounts of the death and burial of Shilluk Kings.[1] I was not able on this occasion to follow the ceremonies in detail, for the death of a Shilluk *reth* and the installation of his successor is carried out over a long period with a mass of ritual observance. I attended some of the ceremonies, had conversations with some of the participants later and am also indebted to Mr. J. L. Baker, then District Commissioner of the Shilluk, for much of the information recorded here.

I have assumed in the reader some knowledge of previous publications on the subject. In broad outline the procedure followed may be summarized as follows:—

(1) Immediately after his death the body of the *reth* is carried to a village with which he has had previous close association and is there ceremonially immured in a special hut. It should remain there for a period which varies between a few months and over a year.

(2) Meanwhile, the new *reth* is elected in the traditional manner by an electoral college of hereditary chiefs and, unless internal conflicts follow over the choice, begins to prepare himself for his installation.

(3) The remains of the late *reth* are then removed from the hut and carried to the village of his birth or adoption, and there buried in in the house formerly occupied by him. Full mourning ceremonies in which a large proportion of the population play their part follow.

(4) Preparations for the installation, involving all sorts of preliminary ritual observance and ceremonies, continue and the final stages are timed to take place after the harvest and before the rains.

(5) The formal installation then takes place and consists of the march of Nyikang (the original *reth* and culture-hero of the Shilluk who is represented in effigy) from Aburwa to Fashoda;

[1] See in particular: Munro, P., *Installation of the Reth of the Chol, Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. I, 1918; Howell, P. P., and Thomson, W. P. G., *The Death of a Reth of the Shilluk and the Installation of his Successor, S.N. & R.*, Vol. XXVII, 1946; Thomson, W. P. G., *Notes on the Death of a Reth of the Shilluk, S.N. & R.*, Vol. XXIX, 1948. Also Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan*, Fraser Lecture, 1948, Cambridge University Press.

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the flight of the *reth*-elect to Debalo where he remains in seclusion while the warriors of the south (*gol* Nyikang) gather to his aid; the gathering of the host of Nyikang supported by the warriors of the north (*gol* Dhiang); the *reth's* march against Nyikang, the mock battle and his defeat and capture by Nyikang; his substitution for Nyikang on the royal stool and his possession by the spirit of Nyikang; his purification and seclusion in a temporary camp outside the capital; his vigil in the sacred mound of Aturwic; a further battle with Nyikang and the establishment of peace between them, and finally, after these important ritual events are over, a public ceremony in which the chiefs of the country publicly declare their allegiance while exhorting him to perform his duties justly.

Each event in this procedure is a further step towards the transference of the soul of Nyikang from the dead *reth* to his successor, which has always been an essential feature of the Shilluk monarchy. Each stage in the burial and installation ceremonies is another crisis passed, for until the substitution has been made, the Shilluk people are in a condition of extreme spiritual danger as well as of actual political danger since at any time civil war may break out over the choice of the new *reth*. This is manifest throughout.

The *reth*-elect, who was chosen by the electoral college shortly after the death of his predecessor, is Kur, son of Fafiti *wad* Yor who was *reth* of the Shilluk from 1917 until 1943. At the time of writing the installation ceremonies are not yet completed and we are here concerned only with the death and burial of *reth* Dak *wad* Fadiet. We must remember, however, that these ceremonies are part of a whole chain of events designed to achieve the safe and successful transference of the spirit of Nyikang from the old *reth* to the new and to bring back to the tribe its former stability.

reth Dak *wad* Fadiet died in Malakal on the evening of May 8th, 1951. His death was not unexpected since he had been ailing for some time and under treatment in hospital for advanced tuberculosis. He was attended personally in hospital by a medical dresser who was also his nephew, and his wives and followers were to some extent excluded from direct contact with him. There was an intense atmosphere of potential danger to his life and a feeling that he would be despatched by his wives before he died a natural death, for it was widely known that he was seriously ill, but I believe that this derived mainly from the medical dresser himself, who, acting in an entirely untraditional capacity, sought to stress the conventional attitudes demanded of him. At any rate there is no evidence that he was put to death or even "assisted to die." [1]

[1] See Howell & Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 11 and p. 19, and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

766 Arrangements were made immediately to transport his body to Fashoda, where he should have died, and a steamer left early the next morning. From Fashoda he was carried to Debwor, a small village nearby which had been expressly made for this purpose and the untraditional manner of his passing does not seem to have caused much comment among the Shilluk themselves. The body was seen by Mr. J. L. Baker, District Commissioner of the Shilluk, on the morning of the 10th and he describes it as being shrouded in white cloth and fanned by his sisters with white goose feathers. There was, in fact, some delay in the preparation of the body, since his death had occurred away from the capital, but after some special ivory bangles had been fetched from Famadh, he was placed according to custom inside a hut in the village of Debwor. The body was laid on a specially constructed bier (*pam*);[1] a rectangular construction lined on the outside with fish-spears and covered with a white cloth. The hut was then sealed up and large numbers of Shilluk, mainly from nearby settlements, arrived to pay their homage in the traditional manner. The obsequies were completed by the 12th May, and thereafter the electoral college met to elect the new *reth*, Kur *wad* Fafiti.

643 It is apparently the *reth*-elect who decides when the reburial and mourning ceremonies (*wowo*) are to take place in close consultation with the 644 kinsmen of the late *reth*, for they are materially concerned, and also with 428 the *ororo*[2] who are largely responsible for the funeral arrangements. In fact 766 there was some argument between the *reth*-elect and the immediate family of the late *reth*. The former insisted that all disputes over the inheritance of the royal cattle should be settled before the final mourning ceremonies should take place. During *reth* Dak's illness in hospital, his brother Col and his eldest son Adieng, had taken stealthy measures to hide some of the cattle which, by royal right, should pass to his successor and not to his personal heirs. 643 The decision was made in November and leads me to believe that the prevailing consideration is that the final mourning ceremonies should always be 766 completed by the next harvest, since the installation of the new *reth* should take place shortly after the crops have been gathered.[3]

The period between death and final burial therefore varies according to the time of year in which death takes place.

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[1] *pam*: Used only for members of the royal clan and for chiefs.

[767] [2] The *ororo*, originally descended from *reth* Ocolo and separated from the royal house. They have special functions to perform at the burial ceremonies and installation of a *reth*. See Howell and Thomson, *idem*, p. 6, and Pumphrey, *The Shilluk Tribe*, pp. 12-14.

[3] On this subject see Howell and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 127, *et seq.*, and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

A [i.e., with Fadiet's. - Analyst]

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Preparations then began at the small village of Kujo in the settlement of Fanyidwai Pac in the southern Shilluk area. This village had been built by Dak Fadiet himself when he moved from his mother's home in Fathworo at the invitation of *kwanyireth* Gaw *wad* Ageng of Fato and was occupied by him from the age of about seventeen until his accession. The word *kujo* means literally, "I do not know" and apparently referred to his ignorance of the future and whether he would become *reth* or not, but expressed his pious hope.[1] Within this village two huts were built by him and known as his *gol dwong* (great house) and occupied by him when in residence. This is a common practice with all Shilluk kings and the *gol dwong* eventually becomes the *bongo*, shrine or tomb, and is always sited in the village of their birth or adoption. These huts were fenced around in the manner of all royal shrines in preparation for the burial. These preparations were carried out by the kinsmen of *reth* Dak under the general supervision of the *ororo*. Yet despite his wishes, which were well known, his son Adieng caused further trouble by insisting that his father should be buried in the village of Pa Loc in Famadh with which he had had close associations. He went as far as to waylay the *ororo* when they were carrying the *jamkwer*, sacred objects, in particular the ambatch seat (*kwom*) used by the *reth* and in which his spirit was said to be, to Kujo, upon which Fanyidwai, the division in which Kujo is situated and where *reth* Dak was brought up, rose in arms and only the timely arrival of the chiefs of both areas prevented a clash. It was generally accepted that Adieng was quite wrong in assuming that his father wished to be buried at Pa Loc, which would have been untraditional, and his motives are obscure.[2]

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1 I have heard since that Kujo, as a hamlet, was not built until after Dak had been elected. The name Kujo therefore expresses his feeling of uncertainty before his installation at Fashoda.

2 I am indebted to Father W. Hurst, of the Mill Hill Mission, for further information on this incident. Apparently it is customary for the late *reth's* ambatch seat (*kwom*, but to be distinguished from the sacred stool, also *kwom*, used at the installation ceremonies) to be carried to the place where his remains will finally rest almost immediately after his death. The *reth's* spirit is manifest in this seat and it is often spoken of as the *reth* on this occasion. In the case of Dak *wad* Fadiet, the seat was carried from Fashoda to Famadh where it was placed in a hut which (by the people of Famadh) was reckoned to be his future tomb. The procession was accompanied by villagers on its way, each settlement turning out to follow as far as their boundaries. During the next few days, people from all sides marched to Famadh, *be kemo reth*, "*to visit the reth.*" News soon reached the people of Fanyidwai, who descended on Famadh in force and carried off the seat and other sacred objects. In their haste, some of the sacred beads were upset on to the ground which was considered a misfortune, at any rate by the people of Famadh. It appears then that these objects must be carried to the *reth's* final resting place and where they rest, there he will be buried. *reth* Dak had always shown particular favouritism to Famadh and Pa Loc was regarded as his personal village. The custom that the *reth* should be buried in the village where he was brought up, however, appears to have prevailed.

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766 [782] The *ororo* then went to fetch the body from Debwor. The remains were put in a special bag made from the hide of a cow-calf sacrificed for the occasion and wrapped in white cloth and the party set out for Kujo, travelling by night and with an advance guard who were entitled to seize small gifts and ransoms from those unfortunate enough to cross their path.[1]

[782] On the arrival of the party at Kujo an ox was sacrificed as *akadh* (a sacrifice to allow them to enter the village) and the remains of *reth* Dak were brought into the *gol dwong*, by now transformed into his *kengo*. The grave was then dug inside one of the two huts[2] and on the second day *heglig* wood (*Balanites aegyptica*) was cut and a new bier (*pam*) was constructed, bound with leather thongs taken from the hide of the ox sacrificed as *akadh*. On this the remains were placed, lowered into the grave and buried. Immediately [533] afterwards the chief (*jago*) of the *ororo* came out singing the song of Nyikang which is the usual signal for the start of public ceremonies and the song was taken up by those outside. On this occasion the crowd proceeded to the river [783 787] to bathe themselves. Apparently the spirit of the *reth* himself had appeared to one of the *bangreth* in a dream and had demanded that this untraditional rite of purification should take place.[3] After this the duties of the *ororo* were completed and the *kwa* Nyikir took over. *kwa* Nyikir come from Fadong north of Fashoda and are specifically concerned with the funeral dances of Shilluk *reths*[4]

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[1] Fr. Hurst informs me that they travelled fast but not for long distances. They rested for the day at some village where a bull was sacrificed. Only a small party [782] travelled with the *reth's* remains and it was noticeable that the people kept out of the way. At every large watercourse a sheep was sacrificed, again called *akadh*. The word is derived from the verb *kadho*, "to cross over."

[2] I was not present at Kujo until later, and had I been there, I should not have been allowed to witness the actual burial. The procedure was described to me later and I can only give the bare outline of what happened. I was informed that the grave is of the usual Shilluk pattern—a straight slit-trench with a side chamber below, in which the body is placed lying full length on the right side.

[3] I was unable to discover where this idea originated and whether it had any special [177] significance. I suspect Christian associations since *reth* Dak had been educated for three years at the elementary school at Doleib Hill (American Presbyterian Mission) and had retained links with them.

[4] Nyikir. "Children of the Nile (Kir)." Tradition relates that these people are [173] not Shilluk in origin but were found by Nyikang at a place called Podho Ngu ("the lion country"). Nyikang was attracted by their drumming. On Nyikang's approach they fled into the river where Nyikang captured them and made them his drummers, their specific duty being to beat the drums at the funeral wakes of all subsequent *reths*. I am indebted to Mr. J. L. Baker for this information.

Just before dawn they set up the four royal drums on end in holes specially dug in the ground[2] and in the centre of the village opposite the *kengo*. They were beaten for a short while as a signal that the public ceremonies of mourning would begin that day. In addition a fire was lit using fire sticks (*pic mac*), an important ritual item in any Shilluk ceremony, and a sheep was sacrificed.

I reached Kujo that afternoon just in time to see the *kwa* Nyikir enter the village again, singing as they came and carrying the spear of Nyikang wrapped in white cloth and also a basket which I was told contained certain sacred relics including the bell or Nyikang (*orok Nyikang*). The party stepped over a sheep held to the ground in front of them[1] and then took up their position round the drums.

Meanwhile an ox had been tethered near to the drums and a Shilluk warrior stood by, spear in hand. At a given signal he plunged his spear into the ox, missing the heart, and causing only a slight wound in the haunch, with the result that it broke away and had to be despatched outside the village. No particular attention was paid to this unfortunate incident which might have been regarded as an ill omen, and immediately the drums began to beat, the *kwa* Nyikir skipping round them four times and again stepping on to and over a sheep tethered to the ground. The main body of spectators consisting of important persons and the occupants of Kujo and neighbouring villages then entered the arena. These people carrying millet stalks, sticks and swords, but no spears, danced round the drums in an anti-clockwise direction singing the song of Nyikang followed by that of *reth* Dak Nyikang and finally a new song composed in honour of the deceased. After several minutes of dancing in this manner, the crowd moved forward and knelt facing the shrine clapping their hands as a sign of grief. These royal mourning songs reflect the Shilluks' attitude towards their kings. *Agwet wad Nyidhongo piny apath cie Yor wad Nyidhongo labo arieny*, "Agwet wad Nyidhongo, the earth is

[2] These holes are specially dug beforehand and bells and other sacred objects put beneath the drums. For normal social events Shilluk drums are laid horizontally or lean against supports set in the ground.

[1] The significance of this act is not clear and Shilluk merely say that it must be done; it is "according to custom," *kwong*. I have, however, frequently heard it said that the act, *ahadh*, is intended to remove impurities which might be harmful to the *reth*. The procedure is followed in all sorts of ritual situations in which the *reth* is concerned. It will be remembered that the *reth* steps over a bull-calf when he leaves Debalo and over a black bull at Arepejur on his way to Fashoda on the first day of the installation ceremonies. It will also be remembered that in the old days, prior to *reth* Fadiet, a man (and a girl) was subjected to the same treatment as the bulls and sheep, and, though it is not true that he invariably died in the process, he was never allowed to come into direct contact with the *reth*. See Howell and Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 54 and p. 79, Note 21.

533 destroyed, Yor son of Nyidhongo, the country is ruined," is one of the main
539 refrains of the song of Yor. Other songs refer to the immortality of their
766 *reths*. Of Dak, son of Nyikang, we hear that he only vanished, he did not die.
[775] Of Kweikon, who was killed in battle against the Dervishes at Jebel Gadir,
[173] they sing, *Kurjang* (Kweikon) *cie keny aboi tho nyiwang kecdi tho wadi nini*, "Kurjang the fierce one, when he went out to die he did not fear, fierce one, death is only sleeping."

766 Warriors from the surrounding settlement of Fanyidwai Pac then entered
[576] in battle order, carrying their shields and spears. After a preliminary march round the arena, spears and shields were discarded and only sticks and millet stalks carried. This is usual at Shilluk public ceremonies. Dances continued for three days, men of Fanyikang, Dettim, Fakang and Malakal attended and the procedure was not different. Over two hundred and eighty oxen were slaughtered for the occasion, the tails and some of the horns being hung on the fence surrounding the tomb, while the meat was consumed by the participants.

[783] On the final day, after a great show of dancing and further sacrifices, the ceremony of purification known as *dungo* (or *Yul*) took place. The *bangreth*, *nyireth* and also many other kinsmen of the late *reth* were conducted by the *ororo* into the centre of the village, where an ox was sacrificed while they sat round in the centre. According to strict Shilluk custom, this should have
[177 302] been followed by a general shaving of heads. In fact, they did not do so, possibly because the ritual bathing in the river was considered sufficient purification. No satisfactory explanation for this deviation from custom was forthcoming. It is worth mentioning also that the *ohak nam*, latrine, and the *bilo* (or *gol pi*) bath place, of the late *reth*, which are attached to the *gol dwong* and used by him in the past, were fenced off and guarded. Anyone approaching them was seized by the *ororo* and made to pay a small forfeit.

643 The *reth*-elect, Kur *wad* Fafiti, was present on the first day of the *wowo*,
766 as a gesture of respect to his predecessor, for it is not necessary for the new *reth* to be there and he never appears in public. In particular he may not see the relics of Nyikang carried by the *kwa* Nyikir, for these are associated with the death and burial of a *reth*, not with the living.

766 The *kwa* Nyikir then set out for Debwor where a similar ceremony was to be held for the northern Shilluk. I was not myself present and am indebted to Mr. J. L. Baker for the following account.

"On November 21st, the *ororo* and *kwa* Nyikir had returned to Fashoda for the final act in the obsequies of *reth* Dak and arrived there after several days spent on the road. At about 4 p.m., as at Kujo where the actual bodily

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remains of the *reth* had been buried, the *kwa* Nyikir took the field in front of four upturned drums. These drums were either those of the village of Debwor or had been borrowed from nearby villages. The anti-clockwise procession of the *kwa* Nyikir then began, each of them hopping over a gourd (*keny*) which was produced as a substitute for a sheep which is normally used on these occasions. The drummers, led by *jago* Bol, their chief, then took up their position round the drums and began to beat them. At Debwor there was no ritual lighting of fire (*pic*) by fire sticks as at Kujo and which had preceded all ceremonies relating to the election of the *reth* and the burial of the old one; possibly the spirit of the late *reth* had left the place. As the drums began to beat, the chiefs of Gerr—with the exception of the chief of Muomo who was in charge of the arrangements for the installation then being made at the shrine at Akurwa and had not come—began to dance with the shuffling gait of a religious dance (*yieko* as opposed to social dances, *cong tugo*) and finally all went up to the hut in which the late *reth's* body had lain for so many months and sang songs to Nyikang outside it just as the chiefs of Luak had done outside the burial hut at Kujo and an ox (*nyijak*) was speared as a sacrifice. The purport of this song was "we have asked for cows but instead you have beaten us; please restore to us our cows this time." This presumably meant that they were asking for better treatment under the new *reth*, for Dak *wad* Fadiet, "the scourge of Nyikango," had been a most unpopular figure outside his own area.

With this, the important ceremonies were over and the march of the clans followed. The sections which participated were Both, Bol, Nyingaro, Pabur, Agodo, Biu, Thwolong, Yony, Lul, Fashoda, Nyigir, Golbany, Fadheiang, and Lemo. This took two days. Kodok and Golo did not come, possibly because they were too much in favour of the house of Fafiti and had never supported Dak. Thus the pattern of this ceremony in Gerr followed closely that which had been performed in Luak at Kujo, only there was no body to bury. The predatory *ororo* had little to do except the unpleasant one of taking up the bier and skins on which the *reth's* remains had previously lain and rotted and burying them inside the hut and of guarding the sacred mound outside the hut. I had thought that this hut, where the body of the late *reth* had been immured, would be broken down when the remains had been brought out to carry to Kujo, but this was not so, and the *ororo* had the ghoulish task of breaking down the door and collecting the remains into a presentable bundle while the house was still standing. The hut was still in good condition and will not be broken down until later, when the *bangreth* Dak will level the hut to ground, though they will continue to occupy the rest of the village as formerly."

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766 This superficial account of the death, burial and mourning ceremonies of the late *reth* Dak *wad* Fadiet adds a few further details to our records of previous burials.[1] There was no fundamental difference in the procedure, but it is worth noting the following points:—

(i) *reth* Fafiti *wad* Yor, who died in 1944, was not placed in a hut for any time, but was buried almost immediately in his personal village.[2] At the time it was said that since his father Yor had died and had not been thus immured, it was correct that his son likewise should be buried immediately. Past precedents are always deemed important by the Shilluk, even to the extent of altering established custom.

[183]

(ii) In the case of his successor Anci *wad* Kur, the body was first laid in a hut at Fadwol, a village occupied by the slaves and dependants of his father Kur and was finally buried at Golbainy in his personal village. This was considered a return to normal custom. Both these villages are in the northern Shilluk area (Gerr). Mourning ceremonies were carried out at both, but there was no equivalent ceremony among the southern Shilluk.

(iii) It follows that the *wowo* ceremonies carried out for Dak *wad* Fadiet, first at Kujo in the southern Shilluk area (Luak) and then at Debwor in the northern area (Gerr), were dictated by his previous residence and not by any demand for a repetition based on this division of Shilluk country as might be expected.[3]

(iv) It appears, then, that what might be called the "lying in state," should take place in a village built near to the capital and built largely for the purpose. The burial should take place in the original village of the late *reth*, the home of his mother, or more often the home of his adoption.

[643 591]

1 See Howell and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 18 *et seq* and Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-152.

2 Howell and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

3 *Id.*, p. 6 and p. 75.

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PLATE 16. The *kwa* Nyikir entered the village of Kujo, after stepping over a sheep held to the ground.

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PLATE 17. They entered the village, singing and dancing, with the spear of Nyikang wrapped in white cloth, and the basket containing sacred relics.

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PLATE 18. Meanwhile an ox had been tethered near the drums, and a warrior stood by, spear in hand, ready for the sacrifice.

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PLATE 19. After several minutes of dancing, the crowd moved forward and knelt before the tomb.

[p. 164 B]